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Reaping the World's Disfavor

By Harold Meyerson

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Save for the continuing search for its justification, the war in Iraq is over. For the United States, if not yet for Iraq, the consequences are clear. We have established yet again the utter supremacy of our hard power.

Unfriendly governments tremble anew at our armed might and our willingness to use it. Some, to be sure, are hard at work building their atomic arsenals, and the last thing we need is a trembling adversary with a nuclear trigger. Still, if the challenge before us is military, our government is justly confident we can deter or defeat it.

But when it comes to our soft power -- our ability to persuade nations to work with us, to inspire their people to admire us and our social arrangements and ideals -- we have all but unilaterally disarmed. At least so long as George W. Bush is president.

Consider some new polling by the nonpartisan Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, which measured public opinion in 44 nations during the summer and fall of 2002 and took further soundings in 21 nations in late April and May. All told, 54,000 people were surveyed, the clear majority of whom were mightily peeved at the United States in general and Bush in particular.

Not surprisingly, the number of people holding a favorable view of the United States has plunged in the wake of the war. Last summer the percentage of Germans who viewed us positively was 61 percent; today it's 45 percent. In France, our favorability rating has declined from 63 percent then to 43 percent now. In Spain, where Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar's government supported the war, U.S. favorability ratings are down to a scant 38 percent.

Look at the numbers a little more and you see unmistakable evidence that support for the Western alliance is coming unglued. The idea that Western Europe should have an approach to security and diplomatic matters that's more independent of the United States won the support of 76 percent of the French, 62 percent of the Spanish, 61 percent of the Italians, 57 percent of the Germans. If the Bush administration's goal was to keep the European Union from becoming a rival superpower, its war seems to have had precisely the opposite effect.

In nations that have not been our historical allies, fear of the United States has skyrocketed. The number of Indonesians who are "very or somewhat worried" that the United States could become a threat to their country is 74 percent, and the same apprehension was voiced by 72 percent of Nigerians and 71 percent of both Russians and Turks.

The Indonesian apprehension is worth some special scrutiny. On any number of questions, respondents from the world's fourth most populous country showed themselves to be overwhelmingly antagonistic to American viewpoints and positions. Partly this reflects a perspective now common to the Muslim world. But I suspect it also results from Indonesians' rage at their treatment by the International Monetary Fund and Robert Rubin, then U.S. treasury secretary, during the East Asian financial meltdown of the late '90s. With Indonesia facing an economic collapse the likes of which the United States hadn't seen since

the Hoover administration, the mandate from the Americans was to cut back spending -- which had the predictable consequence of plunging Indonesia into a profound and lasting depression.

For the rest of the planet, the problem isn't Clinton's guys, it's Bush. In nation after nation, people affirm democratic ideals that they still generally associate with the United States -- but not with its president. In the 21 nations polled last month, respondents in 17 said that the problem with the United States was "mostly Bush" rather than "Americans in general."

All of which follows quite logically from the administration's reversals of what had been America's fundamental relationships to other nations. In disdaining the United Nations and NATO, in proclaiming for his nation the right to preemptive war and immunity from international standards, and in waging a war based on trumped-up allegations, George W. Bush has clearly decided that it is better for the United States to be feared than admired.

Our greatest presidents haven't viewed foreign relations as requiring this kind of trade-off. Under Franklin Roosevelt, the United States had the world's mightiest arsenal and was its beacon of hope. But that's the kind of synthesis that Bush seems incapable even of imagining.

Besides, it was Bush's father -- the special envoy to China, U.N. ambassador and CIA director -- who felt comfortable in the world. Our current Bush is the guy who almost never traveled abroad until he became governor of Texas. On the contrary, he revels in the role of the belligerent provincial. And after 21/2 years as president, damned if he hasn't remade the world in his own xenophobic image of it.

The writer is editor at large of the American Prospect.

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